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# ASEAN as the 'regional conductor': understanding ASEAN's role in Asia-Pacific order

*Robert Yates*

**Abstract:** This paper analyses ASEAN's prominence in regional order negotiation and management in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific through the lens of social role negotiation. It argues that ASEAN has negotiated legitimate social roles as the 'primary manager' in Southeast Asia and the 'regional conductor' of the Asia-Pacific order. It develops an English School-inspired role negotiation framework and applies it to three periods: 1954-1975 when ASEAN's 'primary manager' role emerged from negotiations with the US; 1978-1991 when ASEAN's role was strengthened through negotiations with China during the Cambodian conflict; and 1991-present when ASEAN created and expanded the 'regional conductor' role. Negotiations during the Cold War established a division of labour where great powers provided security public goods but the great power function of diplomatic leadership was transferred to ASEAN. ASEAN's diplomatic leadership in Southeast Asia provided a foundation for creating its 'regional conductor' role after the Cold War. ASEAN's ability to sustain its roles depends on maintaining role bargains acceptable to the great powers, an increasingly difficult task due to great power rivalry in the South China Sea.

**Keywords:** ASEAN; regional order; social roles; great powers; English School

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has played a prominent part in negotiating and managing order in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific, during times of stability and during times of transition and crisis when we would expect the great powers exclusively to play the leading role. What is interesting about ASEAN's contribution to order is that, rather than being a by-product of either the regional balance of power or the region's unique normative structure, it instead appears to constitute part of a division of labour negotiated with the great powers. After the US' failure in Vietnam led it to withdraw from mainland Southeast Asia in 1975 a situation emerged where the US provided security public goods and guarantees to maritime Southeast Asia through bilateral security relationships whilst ASEAN developed indigenous forms of association which it sought to extend to Vietnam. The US' and ASEAN's performance of these functions were complementary in that they were both aimed towards embedding an anti-communist order in maritime Southeast Asia and neutralising the perceived threat from Vietnam. The ASEAN states' regionalism enabled its members to demonstrate regional autonomy and the US' distance from direct military involvement

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in Southeast Asia satisfied a domestic population critical of its costly intervention in Vietnam. Although not necessarily intentional, this reflected a clear division of labour. During Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, this division of labour was reinforced and shifted to include China. ASEAN provided a diplomatic vanguard to delegitimise Vietnam's actions, whilst China threatened Vietnam and tied it down within Cambodia by aiding Cambodian rebels. The US acquiesced to China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979 and continued to provide support to the coalition from a distance (Emmers 2003, Jones 2012). In the post-Cold War Asia-Pacific ASEAN has developed regional institutions that encompass all the major regional powers, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and East Asia Summit (EAS). All the great powers have signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), recognising ASEAN's norms in return for joining the EAS. ASEAN's diplomatic leadership in providing forums for inclusive engagement and a normative framework all can agree on complements the US' continued provision of security public goods through its hub-and-spokes alliance network and China's increasing provision of economic public goods.

Such small power contribution to order has attracted vigorous debate (Emmers 2003, Eaton and Stubbs 2006, Ba 2009, Jones 2012, Acharya 2014, Stubbs 2014). This paper's primary contribution is to bring the analysis of social roles into this debate. By analysing social role negotiation between ASEAN and the great powers, we can build on previous work to better understand how ASEAN's contribution fits into the regional division of labour. In particular this paper argues that ASEAN has come to perform important social roles as the 'primary manager' of Southeast Asian order and 'regional conductor'<sup>1</sup> of Asia-Pacific order as a result of reaching reciprocal role bargains with the great powers. These role bargains have established a division of labour with respect to the performance of functions in upholding regional order. The paper will show how these role bargains have been reached at key junctures from the early Cold War to the present day. During the Cold War, ASEAN's role bargains with the US and China established a division of labour where great powers provided security public goods but the key great power function of diplomatic leadership was transferred to ASEAN. ASEAN's diplomatic leadership in Southeast Asia then provided a foundation for creating its 'regional conductor' role in the uncertainty after the Cold War and embedding it within renewed role bargains *vis-a-vis* the US' 'offshore great power guarantor' role and China's 'responsible regional great power' role. ASEAN's ability to sustain its prominence in order negotiation and management is due to its redefining,

reclaiming and renegotiating its evolving roles within bargains with the great powers.

This paper advances its arguments through three sections. The first discusses the debate regarding ASEAN's contribution to regional order and explores how alternative approaches have understood ASEAN's role. It argues that each approach captures important aspects of ASEAN's role but that a social roles analysis, rooted in an English School (ES) conceptual framework, better provides the flexibility necessary to account for cumulative and ongoing ASEAN-great power negotiations. The second section outlines an analytical framework for tracing social role negotiation based on legitimation whereby an actor claims a role and seeks endorsement from key legitimating constituencies. The third section then applies this framework to three periods: 1954-1975, when ASEAN's 'primary manager' role was created through a bargain with the US *vis-a-vis* the US 'offshore great power guarantor' role in maritime Southeast Asia; 1979-1991, during the Cambodian conflict when ASEAN began to extend its 'primary manager' role to mainland Southeast Asia through a role bargain with China which legitimised China's 'regional great power guarantor' role; 1991-present, when ASEAN built on cumulative role negotiation to create its 'regional conductor' role in the wider Asia-Pacific region. This paper concludes by highlighting the current challenges for ASEAN in maintaining role bargains with the great powers under increasing great power rivalry.

### **Debating ASEAN's role**

For a long time ASEAN's role was understood through an implicitly realist lens. Leifer captured well the nature of ASEAN's role as a moderately successful regional manager within its own subregion and a diplomatic community that could act collectively beyond its subregion (Leifer 1989). However, realists considered ASEAN's role contingent on the balance of power between the great powers. Any regional division of labour would therefore reflect how power was balanced within the region and whether the great powers had an interest in granting ASEAN a role, or whether their disinterest essentially left ASEAN to its own devices. It was the latter that led to ASEAN taking up its regional management role as Britain and the US drew-down their military commitments leaving ASEAN states to take responsibility for managing their own relations and prevent a vacuum being filled by other external powers. The communist victories in Indochina boosted ASEAN's internal managerial role but its external diplomatic role was only boosted after Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia drew the interests of China and the US back into Southeast

Asia making ASEAN a partner in balancing against Vietnam. ASEAN then found space to extend its regional management into the Asia-Pacific by forming the ARF because of the strategic uncertainty immediately after the Cold War and because no great power individually or collectively was willing or able to provide leadership in creating a regional security organisation. As long as great power rivalry continued then the great powers had an interest in passing the buck of regional institution-building to ASEAN and ASEAN's promotion of consultation and conflict avoidance could enjoy limited success (Leifer 1996, Emmers 2003).

Constructivists challenged this approach, arguing that ASEAN could actively shape great power interests in maintaining its prominence by acting as a norm entrepreneur and socialiser (Johnston 2008, Acharya 2009, 2014). ASEAN was continuing a tradition of Asian actors localising external norms and creating indigenous norms. These formed a normative structure which determined what was appropriate for different types of powers to do in the region and thereby accounted for the region's division of labour. ASEAN's success in establishing the ARF reflected the embeddedness of sovereignty and anti-colonialism in the normative structure; non-hierarchical cooperative security led by small powers was more appropriate than great power-led collective security (Acharya 2009). ASEAN's informal forums offered conducive environments for socialising wary great powers into accepting and internalising these norms. China's increasing comfort with multilateralism and moves towards a benign good neighbour policy in the early 2000s were seen as reflecting such internalisation (Johnston 2008). However, China's recent assertive turn has challenged this argument and there remains the outstanding question of why bilateral great power-small power security ties, where domination is more acute, were considered appropriate within the division of labour. This suggests the need to look beyond the intersection between structure and state interaction in understanding how state interests and norms can be differently interpreted and instrumentalised in realising the regional division of labour.

Critical theorists have done so by highlighting the importance of domestic social forces (Jones 2012). Jones has convincingly shown that ASEAN's preference for regional cooperation based on non-interference is not due to the salience of norms but rooted in the politics of ruling classes within ASEAN states and their concern to insulate social conflicts from external interference. He has argued that this makes ASEAN's regional management defensive in nature aiming to keep unwanted issues off the regional agenda rather than offering any substantive

normative leadership (Jones 2010, 2012). However, ASEAN's place in the regional division of labour depends on ASEAN satisfying great power demands. This has meant issues such as human rights and democracy promotion, particularly pertaining to Myanmar, have had to be included on ASEAN's regional agenda (Jones 2012: 180-210).

Some important insights emerge from the exchanges between realist, constructivist and critical approaches which can be fruitfully brought together. These are that the balance of power alongside prevailing norms are critically important in providing a political context within which actors interact. However, these contexts are not determinate but are themselves shaped by interaction, contestation and negotiation between states *and* important social forces. Bringing these insights together is where a role negotiation framework comes in. The negotiation of roles between states takes place within prevailing distributions of capabilities and normative/political contexts but is shaped by competing social forces who seek to achieve certain interests through conceptualising particular roles for their state and having others states perform complementary roles (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016).

The role negotiation framework that this paper develops draws influence from recent constructivist writings on role theory, particularly in understanding the concepts of role conceptions, role expectations and role enactment (Harnisch et al 2011). However, it departs from their efforts to develop generalisable theoretical models for analysing role processes (role making, role-taking, role bargaining etc) between agents interacting within social structures. This paper instead positions its analysis of roles within an English School conceptual framework, asserting that social roles constitute a key aspect of a broader social and purposive arrangement that the ES identifies within the concept of international order (Bull 1995, Hurrell 2007). The ES seeks to understand how particular international and regional orders are constituted through the negotiation and mutual understandings of the members of international or regional society. A central feature of such negotiation is legitimacy, analysed by scholars working within the ES specifically in relation to how great and small powers reach bargains over respective responsibilities towards building and managing order (Goh 2011, Clark 2011, Bukovansky et al 2012). This paper contributes to this work by developing a simple framework based on the practice of legitimation which helps capture roles negotiation between actors interacting within their specific social and historical contexts.

In relation to ASEAN this paper also builds on Alice Ba's work on cumulative negotiation (Ba 2009) and complements Stubbs' understanding of ASEAN's leadership as part of a regional division of labour (Stubbs 2014). Ba shows how ASEAN actors successfully renegotiate ideas about regional organisation at critical junctures, allowing ASEAN to remain central to the various institutional expressions of 'region' (Ba 2009). She also addresses the question of ASEAN's legitimacy, focusing on ASEAN's responses to external challenges through a mixture of resistance and reform (Ba 2013). Ba's work, however, is mostly concerned with internal ASEAN negotiations in maintaining its relevance and legitimacy in the face of challenges. She does not explicitly look at the bargains ASEAN may have reached with the great powers over the wider issue of ASEAN's contribution to regional order. Ba's work on intra-ASEAN consensus over great power roles is however highly relevant in understanding these bargains. Stubbs (2014) has addressed this to a certain extent by arguing that ASEAN's leadership is limited to providing initiatives for consultation and cooperation whilst other powers provide security or economic leadership. Stubbs (2014) argues that ASEAN has shown significant entrepreneurial and intellectual leadership in carving out its place in the division of labour which complements its status as a non-threatening and neutral player. This is down to ASEAN's 'competence power' (Eaton and Stubbs 2006). This paper goes further by showing how this division of labour has been negotiated by ASEAN and the great powers as part of their respective social roles over a number of decades. This division of labour includes: the US providing security public goods as the 'offshore great power guarantor'; China providing regional economic public goods and strategic restraint as the 'responsible regional great power'; Japan providing regional economic and financial public goods through its 'regional economic great power' role; and ASEAN providing diplomatic leadership as the 'regional conductor'. Before showing how this played out the next section outlines the role negotiation analytical framework.

### **Role negotiation in international society**

This section has two aims: 1) define the concept of order and situate social roles and the notion of a role bargain within this concept of order; 2) outline the process of role negotiation and show how it can be operationalised through analysing the practice of legitimation.

Order is "a formal or informal arrangement that sustains rule-governed interaction among ... [groups or individuals] ... in their pursuit of individual and collective goals" (Alagappa 2003: 39). The relevant goals will depend on context but we can understand rules as taking three inter-related

forms: explicit legal rules set out in treaties; implicit norms that determine appropriate and inappropriate behaviour; and fundamental 'deep rules', known as *primary institutions* (Buzan 2004, Khong 2014). Primary institutions are “durable and recognised patterns of shared practices rooted in values held commonly by the members of ... societies, and embodying a mix of norms, rules and principles” (Buzan 2004: 181). Primary institutions constitute international society; they reflect the 'rules of the game' which provide a normative foundation for order that constitutes who the members are and regulates their behaviour. The two primary institutions most concerned with *how* order is negotiated and managed are great power management and diplomacy. It is within these institutions that we can find ES discussion of social roles.

Social roles are made up of three elements: identity, status and function. Actors come to perform social roles through reaching role bargains. A role bargain is a key aspect of a broader understanding on what order is (its material and normative bases), what goals are to be achieved within the order and how order should be managed (what order functions need to be performed and by whom). Actors need to reach a working agreement on their respective legitimate identities, their places within the society (status) and what functions are legitimate for each to perform in relation to negotiating and managing order. A role bargain can therefore be defined as a reciprocal arrangement whereby actors, implicitly or explicitly, agree to a division of labour with respect to the performance of order functions, which accords with their respective identities and statuses and satisfies their interests within the prevailing social and political context. We can identify an implicit role bargain within the institution of great power management, which sets out not only the great power role but also a corresponding small power role (Bull 1995: 194-222, Buzan 2004: 161-204). Small powers recognise the special status and rights of great powers, but great powers need to exercise their responsibilities towards order and recognise small power identities, their status as sovereign states and also the functions they may perform in upholding order.

The great power role has received ample attention for obvious reasons within great power management, but the functions small powers perform has generally been neglected and instead considered as falling within the primary institution of diplomacy (Khong 2014). However, if great and small powers' respective responsibilities are negotiated as part of a reciprocal bargain, then it makes sense to consider these under a single institution. This paper merges great power management and diplomacy into a broader primary institution of 'order management', which does



not presuppose that great powers *exclusively* have responsibility for negotiating and managing order. This allows us to look at how actors may negotiate variegated responsibilities towards order (Bukovansky et al 2012). Order management is conceptually made up of context-specific 'order functions'. Different functions will be relevant depending on the order under study and will be performed by different actors according to the particular negotiations that have taken place. Table 1 outlines broad categories of order functions that *might* be found across different types of order, split into security, economic and diplomatic/normative functions.

<b>Security</b>		<b>Economic</b>		<b>Diplomatic/Normative</b>	
<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>
Security public goods	Security of sea lanes  Military assistance/aid  Rule-enforcement  Holding the line	Economic public goods	Lender of last resort  Financial leadership  Reducing poverty and development asymmetry  Aid provision	Diplomatic leadership	Institution-building  Conflict mediation  Brokerage  Rule-making  Agenda setting  Advocacy
Alliances	Alliance leadership  Alliance confidence				
Balance of power	Deterrence				
Disaster management	Mitigation  Emergency relief				
Strategic restraint	Institutional binding				

**Table 1 – Order functions**

Lack of space precludes a discussion of each order function. However, it is necessary to highlight the key functions commonly attributed to great and small power roles to understand the implications of ASEAN-great power negotiations in redefining these roles. As great powers have superior capabilities they are also assumed to provide security and economic public goods as well as providing a general balance of power within international society and exercising local preponderance to keep other states in check (Bull 1995: 201-202, 207-212). On top of this, they are considered to perform the primary diplomatic/normative function of diplomatic leadership through acting as a concert of powers or through institution-building. This is especially at times of crisis and

transition when they are expected to negotiate order and build institutions to lock-in new order arrangements (Clark 2001, Goh 2013). The small power role is considered to include diplomatic/normative functions in the day-to-day politics of order, not at times of transition. These might include conflict mediation, advocacy and rule-making with respect to specific issues but not deeper questions of order (Panke 2012). As we will see, the novelty of decoupling diplomatic leadership from the great power role and transferring it to the small power role in Southeast Asia, has led to ASEAN's unusual prominence in the negotiation and management of post-Cold War Asia-Pacific order. Before showing how this unfolded it is necessary to outline the role negotiation analytical framework.

Role negotiation involves three stages: role conceptualisation, role claiming and role enactment. An actor first needs to conceptualise a role (identity, status, function) that they want to perform, either by locating a pre-existing role or conceptualising a new role. They then need to claim the role. If the actor receives endorsement for their role claims then they can legitimately enact the role by performing the functions associated with the role. If others contest the actor's role claims then the actor can either give up or re-conceptualise the role and re-claim it. Contestation from key constituencies within the audience over all or aspects of the role claim, often accompanied by counter-role claims from certain key constituencies, will most likely occur at times when order is in transition or unstable. When order appears to be stable it likely means that the role claimant and the audience have reached an agreement on what part different actors will play in making and managing order. This is when we can look for whether a role bargain has been established. We can know when a role bargain has been reached when there exists mutual agreement on: 1) a common goal for order; 2) what order functions need to be performed towards achieving that goal; 3) and who will perform which order functions. As part of a role bargain a role may be redefined (when a claim to a contested function is withdrawn and the function is transferred to actors whose identity or status makes them more acceptable performers of the function), an actor may take on a role or a new role may be created.

We can operationalise this framework through analysing the practice of *legitimation* (Reus-Smit 2007). Actors make claims about their competence to perform particular functions that need endorsement from the relevant constituencies of legitimation. Some functions more clearly require substantial material capabilities such as those in the security and economic categories. Others do not

such as those in the diplomatic/normative category. For our purposes, ASEAN's legitimating constituencies are the great powers, especially the US and China, the states of Southeast Asia and prominent domestic constituencies within ASEAN member states. The great powers are the most important constituency because it is only through securing their endorsement that ASEAN has come to perform its roles. However, during the Cold War the non-ASEAN Southeast Asian states were crucial in limiting ASEAN's role to the maritime subregion. Domestic constituencies were also crucial in shaping ASEAN's role in its early years and more recently liberal constituencies have put pressure on ASEAN to reform meaning ASEAN has had to legitimise its role through appearing more 'people oriented'. However, ASEAN's ruling classes have been quite successful in fencing ASEAN off from serious civil society pressure (Gerard 2014). In seeking to capture the two-way process of claims and endorsement, we can understand communication more broadly than merely discursive communication. Figure 1 shows a spectrum of claims and endorsement moving from the least substantive, purely discursive claims/endorsement, to the most substantive claims/endorsement.



**Figure 1 – Spectrum of claims and endorsement**

This spectrum reflects the degree of cost to the actor in making its claim or giving endorsement. A purely discursive claim is the least costly as it involves merely rhetoric. A substantive claim is the most costly because it involves fully implementing policy action, which may require significant mobilisation of resources and/or tackling domestic opposition. Symbolic claims and endorsement may move beyond the merely discursive by including gestures and actions that indicate the deeper meaning or intention. Performative claims involve policy action that goes some way towards performing a function or at least represents an attempt to perform the function, whereas performative endorsement would involve acting in a way that corresponds with the actor claiming the function. This could include taking part in a claimant's initiatives, following the lead of a claimant on an issue, or acquiescing to the claimant's actions by not pursuing alternative policies and allowing the actor to go through with a policy.

This paper uses an interpretive methodology for determining how legitimation has unfolded and when mutually legitimating actors may have reached role bargains. It uses historical and contemporary secondary accounts as well as archive documents and oral history interviews to establish 1) how ASEAN states and great powers have behaved at any given time and 2) how they understood their behaviour in relation to regional order and its goals, the functions that needed to be performed and who was considered the rightful performer of those functions.

To re-cap, order and social roles are socially negotiated and the key factor for understanding what order functions are relevant within a society and which actors will perform them, is legitimacy. To establish the legitimacy of a role an actor must conceptualise the role, claim it and receive endorsement from the key constituencies of legitimation. The goal of role negotiation is to reach a role bargain: a reciprocal arrangement on respective roles. We will now apply this framework to the three case studies.

## **Role negotiation in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific**

### *The US-ASEAN role bargain in Cold War Southeast Asia 1954-1975*

Between 1954 and 1965 the US and Indonesia competed to establish different visions of order in Southeast Asia, along with competing great power role conceptions. The key contested function was 'diplomatic leadership' and whether this should be performed by the US as it led regional allies in containing communism and embedding an anti-communist order or by Indonesia in leading the region towards autonomy and freedom from external interference. Throughout there was no mutual agreement on what order and its goals should be and therefore no agreement on who should perform what functions.

The US' vision of an anti-communist order with the goal of containment was formed in the early 1950s and its substantive claims to provide security public goods and military leadership within non-communist East Asia were revealed in its establishment of the hub-and-spokes alliance and base network as well as its military aid and assistance to allies. However, the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 triggered the US to become more active in promoting this order in Southeast Asia as it could no longer leave containment of communism in Indochina to the French (Statler 2007). The US responded by seeking to galvanise regional states around an expression of collective

defence which began as a call for United Action and eventually led to the creation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The US' efforts revealed an underlying role conception of the US as a 'great power guardian'. US officials spoke of the US as 'leader of the free world' and its efforts to get regional states behind it demonstrated a performative claim to diplomatic leadership in Southeast Asia and to the function of 'holding the line' against communist advance in Indochina. However, US officials saw Southeast Asian states as weak and vulnerable and did not treat these states as equals, meaning the US' claim to diplomatic leadership often merged into a claim to 'stewardship', a function prevalent in Southeast Asia during the colonial era. For example, regional states such as Thailand and the Philippines were not invited to initial negotiations over a Southeast Asian collective defence treaty in May 1954, causing outrage and accusations of neo-colonialism in Bangkok and Manila<sup>ii</sup>. The US sought to redress this perception at the SEATO conference in Bangkok in 1955 by emphasising that it was invited by Asian partners to perform its 'guardian' role and that SEATO was a pioneer of the slogan 'Asia for Asians' (Jones 2005). Over time, US officials became less concerned about performing diplomatic leadership through SEATO and committed to more overt stewardship, intervening within states in order to prevent the spread of communism. The US intervened in Indonesia during the outer islands rebellion of 1957-1958 and tried to weaken the nationalists and communists and strengthen anti-communist elements within the central government (Kahin and Kahin 1997). The US' performance of 'holding the line' in Vietnam also moved from deterrence to intervention as it introduced ground troops into South Vietnam to help fight the North Vietnamese-backed National Liberation Front in 1965.

In contrast, Indonesia sought to embed an autonomous order in Southeast Asia, where external powers had no role and indigenous states managed their own affairs free from interference. Indonesia's foreign policy reflected its emerging role conception as an 'indigenous great power liberator' built on its indigenous identity and its status as 'independent' and 'non-aligned', rooted in the fact that Indonesia achieved independence through revolution and did not align with either Cold War bloc. Indonesia's role claim was primarily directed at its domestic population as an activist anti-colonial foreign policy served to legitimise ruling governments within the highly diverse new nation. However, it needed endorsement from other states in order for this to be effective. Indonesia saw itself leading other emerging states towards autonomy and freedom by establishing the rules appropriate for Southeast Asian order: the Five Principles of Coexistence (Sukma 1995). Indonesia made a performative claim diplomatic leadership through organising and hosting the Bandung

Conference in 1955 where President Sukarno pleaded: 'do not think of colonialism only in the classic form ... Colonialism has also its modern dress, in the form of economic control, intellectual control, actual physical control by a small but alien community within a nation' (MOFA Indonesia 1955: 19-29). Sukarno argued that newly independent states should seek autonomy through non-alignment, pursuing relations based on the Five Principles rather than security ties with external powers. He pointed to the Colombo Power (India, Indonesia, Ceylon, Pakistan, and Burma) meetings in 1954 as an example of non-aligned states bringing a "fresh approach" to the Indochina conflict that did not include ultimatums or military mobilisation but rather consultation, diplomacy and ideas. Sukarno stated that: '[s]ome countries of free Asia ... spoke on a subject of immediate concern to Asia, and in doing so made it quite clear that the affairs of Asia are the concern of the Asian peoples themselves' (MOFA Indonesia 1955: 19-29).

After Bandung, with a precarious domestic position balanced between the anti-communist military and Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), Sukarno pursued a more radical foreign policy, re-conceptualising the 'liberator' role from performing diplomatic leadership to revolutionary leadership (Leifer 1983). Sukarno enacted the role by taking radical steps to purge any external great power presence from the region, seizing foreign assets and pursuing confrontation against West Irian (still under Dutch influence) and Malaysia (considered a British plot to maintain its influence). Sukarno framed these confrontations as the continuation of Indonesia's revolution and tried to enlist support through a new grouping to rival the UN, the New Emerging Forces (NEFOS) (Jones 2002).

The responses of the relevant constituencies of legitimation in Southeast Asia to the US' role claims were mixed but they rejected Indonesia's claims. Thailand, the Philippines and Malaya entered into security alliances with Western powers and supported the US' efforts to fight communism in Indochina. The Philippines and Thailand sent forces to support the US-led effort and Malaysia and Singapore supported US training of South Vietnamese officers at the Jungle Warfare School in Johor (Ang 2010). Such allies also promoted the anti-communist cause diplomatically. Philippine diplomat Carlos Romulo defended regional states' decisions to take part in collective defence with external powers as an act of self-determination and a protection of sovereignty (Jones 2005). The US' 'great power guardian' role was therefore substantively endorsed by Thailand and the Philippines, acquiesced to by states such as Ceylon and Burma, but opposed by India and

Indonesia, not to mention those states where communist social forces were dominant. The US' claim to diplomatic leadership was still problematic as US attempts to lead regional institution-building were perceived as serving to legitimise US containment imperatives, rather than the expressed needs of Asian states. The 'guardian' role therefore only had partial legitimacy. Sukarno's claim to diplomatic and then revolutionary leadership alienated other states in maritime Southeast Asia which considered Indonesia a significant threat, especially during Confrontation. The PRC and North Korea supported Indonesia's role claims but within Southeast Asia the 'indigenous great power liberator' role lacked legitimacy.

Following the brutal destruction of the PKI and the advent of the Suharto regime in 1966, Indonesia re-aligned itself as a partner of the US and non-communist regional states, demonstrating a rejection of the 'indigenous great power liberator' role. The US' desire to withdraw from Vietnam in the midst of domestic criticism also led to a reconceptualisation of what the US' role should be. The new conception of 'offshore great power guarantor' was reflected in the Nixon Doctrine in 1969, which established that the US would keep treaty commitments and provide a nuclear shield over the region but would no longer commit troops to support regional allies against insurgency (Gurtov 1974). The US' main concern was a face-saving withdrawal from Vietnam, but to the extent there was concern about how the region evolved, US officials expected regional states to organise themselves. This represented a withdrawal of any claim to diplomatic leadership or stewardship leaving space for regional states to play a bigger part in shaping regional order. Negotiations over ASEAN's form during 1966-1975 had important implications for the division of functions in Southeast Asia. The ASEAN states eschewed collective security functions but took responsibility for promoting 'regional resilience' by establishing that they would not interfere in each other's affairs in a way that undermined members' regime consolidation and economic development (Ba 2009). ASEAN also became the primary instrument through which members managed their mutual relations without interference from external powers. For example, during the Corregidor dispute when Philippine-Malaysian relations soured over Philippine claims to Sabah, US officials made a point of not getting involved despite calls from Thai and Philippine officials for US intervention<sup>iii</sup>. The dispute was managed to a large extent by Indonesian and Thai mediation through ASEAN and the fact that Philippine and Malaysian officials sought to de-escalate the dispute reflected the value they saw in ASEAN (Acharya 2014: 48). ASEAN therefore became the 'primary manager' of intra-regional relations and intra-regional rule-making in non-communist Southeast Asia. ASEAN

endorsed the US' provision of security public goods by accommodating external power military bases in the region. It also provided a diplomatic front for legitimising US imperatives in Indochina such as at the Jakarta Conference in 1970 when the ASEAN states promoted a US-friendly diplomatic solution to the conflict in Cambodia following the Lon Nol coup (Ang 2010).

By the time of the US' withdrawal from mainland Southeast Asia in 1975/76 a reciprocal role bargain had emerged between the US and ASEAN. The US provided security public goods as the 'offshore great power guarantor' in support of non-communist states' regime consolidation. In return regional states collectively performed diplomatic leadership as part of ASEAN's 'primary manager' role, managing their own relations, not challenging the US' military presence in the region and providing diplomatic initiatives to legitimise US aims in Indochina. The goals of communist containment and national/regional autonomy were merged to support a common vision of an anti-communist order in Southeast Asia. ASEAN's diplomatic leadership served to legitimise communist containment within maritime Southeast Asia and allowed regional states to demonstrate autonomy. By decoupling diplomatic leadership from the great power role and transferring it to regional states, ASEAN and the US redefined the great power role in Southeast Asia.

#### *China, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict: 1978-1991*

In late 1978 Vietnam invaded Cambodia and ousted the abhorrent Khmer Rouge. Until 1989, the Vietnamese occupied Cambodia to prop up the puppet People's Republic of Kampuchea. China's response to Vietnam's actions was to undertake its own punitive invasion of Vietnam in February 1979. To oppose Vietnam's occupation, China supported the Khmer Rouge rebels against the Vietnamese within Cambodia. Both states aimed to contain the other's influence within Indochina and sought to legitimise their mutual containment through claiming competing roles as guarantors of Southeast Asia's security.

Prior to Vietnam's intervention Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong and Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping both toured ASEAN capitals warning of the dangers the other posed to Southeast Asia and asserting their intentions to protect the region against the other. Pham warned that China was an external power seeking to dominate the region but assured that Vietnam could act as a strong buffer between Southeast Asia and China, thereby seeking to legitimise Vietnam's



hegemony in Indochina as part of an 'indigenous great power buffer' role claim. Deng countered by expressing support for ASEAN and its desire to build a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) (Lee 1981). He highlighted how Vietnam, contrary to ZOPFAN, had penned an alliance with the Soviet Union and warned his hosts not to take lightly Vietnamese warnings to support 'genuine independence' in the region. He assured that if Vietnam did begin its quest for hegemony through invading Cambodia, then China would teach it a lesson. This reflected China efforts to legitimise its opposition to Vietnam as part of a 'regional great power guarantor' role claim. China would protect ASEAN and guarantee its neutrality through militarily resisting Soviet-Vietnamese hegemony (Chang 1979: 254).

In responding to their claims, ASEAN had to take into account: 1) China and Vietnam's respective threats to stability and order through expansionism and support for insurgencies; 2) their potential contributions to securing ASEAN's preferred vision of order, particularly in relation to ASEAN's 'primary manager' role. ASEAN was divided on the first aspect; although all states recognised Vietnam's potential threat, they differed with respect to whether China constituted a greater threat. On the second aspect however, ASEAN was united. ASEAN collectively endorsed China's role claims because China was willing to recognise ASEAN's vision of a coexistence order based on non-interference and ASEAN's 'primary manager' role within that order. This was most clearly expressed through China's agreement to stop aiding communist movements within ASEAN states (Jones 2012: 89-90). Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia represented its refusal to recognise ASEAN's espoused coexistence order and ASEAN's 'primary manager' role.

China and ASEAN shared the goal of checking Vietnamese hegemony in mainland Southeast Asia and reached a reciprocal role bargain through which China took on the 'regional great power guarantor' role in non-communist Southeast Asia and ASEAN upheld its 'primary manager' role. China contributed to regional order as ASEAN understood it through expressing support for non-interference, withdrawing aid to communist opposition groups and by performing the function of 'holding the line' against Soviet-Vietnamese expansionism through its security guarantee to Thailand and backing of the Cambodian resistance. This division of labour was further backed up by the US remaining as the 'offshore great power guarantor' keeping a distance but supporting the coalition through normalising relations with China, acquiescing to its invasion of Vietnam, selling arms to China and providing diplomatic support for ASEAN. ASEAN gained

further endorsement for its 'primary manager' role from China and other external partners and was able to use it to assert the salience of its rules and processes over Cambodia in the face of great power involvement. ASEAN led the international campaign against Vietnam's actions within the UN and the Non-aligned Movement ensuring the conflict was defined as an illegal intervention and establishing that Cambodia should be returned to neutral and independent status after Vietnam's withdrawal (Ang 2013). ASEAN needed China to bolster the Cambodian rebels' military opposition so that it remained credible as a fighting force and China needed ASEAN to provide a Southeast Asian diplomatic voice on the global stage to maintain broad-based opposition towards Vietnam.

However, Malaysia and Indonesia still considered China the principal threat and tried to reach out to Vietnam during the conflict, notably through the Kuantan Principle of 1980. This declared that Vietnam should maintain neutrality between the Soviet Union and China and that there should be a political resolution of the Cambodian conflict which recognised Vietnam's security interests in Cambodia (Van der Kroef 1981). They resisted China's role-taking in Southeast Asia by trying to undermine the China-ASEAN bargain and hold out the possibility of an alternative bargain with Vietnam: ASEAN would recognise Vietnam's interests in Indochina if Vietnam recognised ASEAN's 'primary manager' role by acknowledging that ASEAN's rule-making applied to Indochina. Withdrawing from Cambodia would recognise ASEAN's norm of non-interference and ending its links with the Soviet Union would recognise regional autonomy. However, Vietnam insisted that the situation in Cambodia was irreversible.

The ASEAN states therefore sought to put limits on China's influence in Southeast Asia. ASEAN asserted the salience of its norms and processes over the whole of Southeast Asia to ensure that China's contribution to order was limited to 'holding the line', a function specific to the Cambodian conflict. ASEAN pursued this through trying to limit the influence of the China-backed Khmer Rouge in a post-occupation Cambodia. ASEAN initially called for the disarming of the Cambodian rebels (which would disproportionately impact the KR) at the International Conference on Kampuchea in 1981. This was opposed by China so ASEAN sponsored the creation of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea to dilute the influence of the KR. Certain ASEAN states also sought to draw the US into funding the non-communist rebel factions with limited success (Jones 2012). ASEAN was, however, able to commit China to supporting a neutral Cambodia. In 1981 Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang assured ASEAN that China supported an

independent, neutral and non-aligned Cambodia and had no intention of imposing a communist regime or making Cambodia a Chinese satellite (Chang 1985: 123). By securing this commitment, ASEAN aimed to play the predominant part in order negotiation and management in the whole of Southeast Asia after the Cambodian conflict was resolved. It could not fully realise this during the Cambodian conflict as the communist states in mainland Southeast Asia contested ASEAN's role. However, in the 1990s ASEAN achieved this aim as all the mainland states sought ASEAN membership.

#### *ASEAN's 'regional conductor' role: 1991-present*

In the immediate post-Cold War years, ASEAN faced irrelevance as the Cold War logic underpinning the previous role bargains fell apart. The ASEAN states took steps to sure up the US' commitment to security public goods by individually agreeing access arrangements (Ba 2009: 165-169) and engaged China to socialise it into considering itself a 'responsible regional great power' rather than seeking to revise regional order (Wanandi 1996). To ensure its continued relevance ASEAN needed to create a new role.

ASEAN's response to various proposals for regional security dialogue emanating from the Soviet Union, Canada and Australia revealed its emerging 'regional conductor' role conception (Dewitt 1994). ASEAN saw these as a threat due to the fact that ASEAN may either be subsumed within them or marginalised (Ba 2009). ASEAN instead posited its Post-ministerial Conference (PMC) as the appropriate venue for convening the dialogue. The arguments made to justify this reflected ASEAN's role conception, which included the identity elements of ASEAN as an indigenous and united actor; status elements of ASEAN neutrality and competence as a successful manager of Southeast Asian order; and the primary function of diplomatic leadership with secondary functions of inclusive engagement and rule-making.

ASEAN emphasised its indigenous identity through rejecting 'external' proposals for security dialogue as inappropriate for Asian culture and instead promoting its own model. It highlighted its neutrality and status as a successful manager through the design of the proposed dialogue based on the 'ASEAN way': informal dialogue, moving at a pace comfortable to all, with all decisions based on consensus (Acharya 2014: 171-173). This ensured the process could not be

dominated by any single power, showing that ASEAN was acting as a neutral facilitator of inclusive security dialogue (Almonte 1997/98). ASEAN's promotion of its model and use of the PMC to launch regional security dialogue showed it was also making a statement about its success in managing Southeast Asian order. Singaporean Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng stated that ASEAN's model 'builds confidence ... while minimizing conflict. It is this approach, of broadly engaging our neighbours in Southeast Asia and others in the larger Asia-Pacific that will help promote and strengthen conditions for regional peace and stability' (Chua and Kwang 1992). ASEAN made symbolic claims regarding its united identity and competence to extend its diplomatic leadership at the Singapore Summit 1992 by agreeing to create an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and by upgrading the stature of the Secretariat and the office of Secretary-General. ASEAN also institutionalised summit meetings, agreeing to hold them every three years rather than on an *ad hoc* basis (Antolik 1992). ASEAN made a performative claim the function of 'inclusive engagement' by inviting all major powers and players to attend the ARF. The ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting 1993 outlined the rationale of 'inclusive engagement', stating that:

[t]he continuing presence of the United States, as well as stable relationships among the United States, Japan and China, and other states of the region would contribute to regional stability ... ASEAN and its dialogue partners ... [should] ... work with other regional states to evolve a predictable and constructive pattern of relationships in the Asia-Pacific (Emmers 2003: 115).

All the key powers performatively endorsed ASEAN's claims by agreeing to participate in the ARF. US State Department officials saw US participation in the ARF under ASEAN's leadership as necessary to demonstrate the US' engagement on the region's terms, forestalling attempts to develop an exclusive Asian grouping. ASEAN was also highly regarded in the State Department at that time due to its economic success and its diplomatic contribution (Brown 2003). Japan was the most enthusiastic endorser, supporting Singapore in reaching a consensus within ASEAN on security dialogue and helping to bring the US around (Satoh 1995). China was initially sceptical about multilateralism, seeing it as another means of containment in the wake of the Tiananmen Square killings. However, ASEAN's assurances that the dialogue would be informal with consensus decision-making reassured the Chinese that they would not be singled out within the process.

ASEAN enacted its 'regional conductor' role by convening the first full regional 'orchestra' at the ARF. Through the function of 'inclusive engagement', ASEAN provided a new basis for its relevance in the post-Cold War context. ASEAN's 'score' was also accepted by the regional 'orchestra'; the ARF Concept Paper described the TAC 'as a code of conduct governing relations between states and a unique diplomatic instrument for regional confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and political and security cooperation' (ASEAN 1995). ASEAN therefore contributed to emerging regional order by ensuring that it would be norm-governed, based on ASEAN norms provided in the TAC.

ASEAN situated its 'regional conductor' role within reciprocal role bargains with the US *vis-à-vis* its 'offshore great power guarantor' role and China *vis-à-vis* its emerging 'responsible regional great power' role. ASEAN did not challenge the US' bilateral alliances through its proposed security dialogue, nor 'draw a line down the Pacific' by developing an exclusive East Asian regional grouping; rather, by inviting the US to join the ARF, ASEAN helped the Clinton administration sell its Asia-focused foreign policy domestically in a way that did not alienate regional states through appearing as an 'international nanny' (Goh 2004). ASEAN was also able to demonstrate regional autonomy in shaping the emerging regional order in a way that maintained its relevance. In return for China recognising ASEAN as the 'regional conductor' and showing restraint through accepting regional norms, ASEAN recognised China's concerns by emphasising the informality of the ARF, not inviting Taiwan to join and keeping the Taiwan issue off the ARF agenda. Aside from the Mischief Reef incident and the Taiwan Straits crisis in 1995-1996, China appeared to recognise the need to demonstrate restraint, publishing a Defence White Paper and acquiescing to the South China Sea conflict being discussed at the ARF meeting in 1995. ASEAN's ability to persuade China to discuss the issue at the ARF showed the benefit of ASEAN's 'inclusive engagement'. A US State Department official reported that:

'[t]he ARF ... could put a certain amount of pressure on the Chinese and force the Chinese to take opinions in the region into account in ways that the Chinese wouldn't have had to do if the organization didn't exist ... One year after its creation, the ARF was serving as a significant forum for discussion' (Brown 2003).

These initial role bargains were challenged in the late 1990s when western constituencies

began contesting ASEAN's status as a successful manager of Southeast Asian order in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis and when US attention turned towards the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) in 2001. ASEAN managed to avoid the deterioration of its role by convening an exclusive 'East Asian' regional 'orchestra' as a hedge against the perceived excesses of US unilateralism. Japanese and Chinese willingness to support ASEAN after the financial crisis, meant ASEAN was able to establish summit-level ASEAN Plus One and ASEAN Plus Three (APT) frameworks with the two states and South Korea giving institutional form to an 'East Asian' region that did not include the US. ASEAN nested the APT within the ASEAN process meaning it was able to maintain control over how East Asian regionalism developed (Dent 2010: 8). ASEAN used the Plus One and APT processes to channel emerging Sino-Japanese competition into two order-building processes: negotiating regional order functions as the two states competed to contribute to the Chiang Mai Initiative and promote regional trade agreements; and providing a 'vision' for a regional 'East Asian community' (Goh 2013: 61-68). The eventual outcome of negotiations over regional order functions and a vision for East Asian community was the ASEAN-led East Asia Summit established in 2005. ASEAN strengthened its 'regional conductor' role by asserting that the EAS be convened in ASEAN states and that membership was dependent on making a formal commitment to ASEAN's 'score' by signing the TAC. Since then, ASEAN has seen off challenges in the form of alternative 'architecture' proposals (e.g. former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Asia-Pacific Community proposal) and expanded the number of forums within which it performs the 'regional conductor' role, including the expanded EAS (with Russian and US membership) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus. There is now a general understanding amongst the western states that the EAS is the premier political and security forum and should be supported and developed rather than new institutions being proposed (Fuchs 2015).

The major challenge for ASEAN in maintaining its role is in upholding role bargains that are acceptable to the great powers. The ASEAN-US bargain has been re-invigorated after the challenges of the Bush administration. The US has endorsed ASEAN's role through signing the TAC, establishing the ASEAN-US summit, establishing a permanent US ambassador to ASEAN and upgrading the US-ASEAN relationship to a 'strategic partnership'. It has also renewed its commitment to provide security public goods as part of the 'rebalance'. However, the US now expects ASEAN to use its diplomatic leadership to legitimise US interests and preponderance in the South China Sea. US officials' expect ASEAN to promote a 'rules-based order', with an emphasis

on upholding freedom of navigation and overflight and obstructing China's efforts to consolidate its control over the SCS (Hachigian 2015). The problem with this is that it exacerbates existing issues between ASEAN and China. There is a question regarding China's commitment to the 'responsible regional great power' role as it was defined in the 1990s-2000s during China's 'good neighbour' strategy. China seems to have dropped its commitment towards 'restraint' and now seeks to redefine what its rights and responsibilities are in the region (Deng 2015). Evidence of this can be seen in the China-led One Belt, One Road initiative, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism as well as China's 'assertiveness' in the SCS. This has tested ASEAN's ability to maintain an acceptable role bargain with China, especially as China has sought to scupper any efforts at ASEAN developing a consensus on the SCS and instead re-focus ASEAN's attention to the broader ASEAN-China relationship whilst promoting bilateral negotiations with claimants over the SCS. This is not acceptable for the original ASEAN-5 and Vietnam which are uncomfortable with the prospect of Chinese hegemony, although the Philippines has softened its approach since the election of President Duterte. ASEAN therefore appears stuck: it cannot wield its authority as a 'regional conductor' in the SCS because of Chinese contestation and lack of consensus but it needs to act in order to meet the US' expectations. This means its 'regional conductor' role is in a precarious balance between consolidation and deterioration as the expectations of two powerful legitimating constituencies pull ASEAN in different directions.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that ASEAN's prominence in regional order negotiation and management in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific is based on ASEAN performing legitimate social roles as the 'primary manager' and 'regional conductor'. It presented a framework for analysing role negotiation and showed how this framework can be applied to negotiations between ASEAN and the great powers from the early Cold War years to the present day. Through this we can better understand how ASEAN's prominence is part of a regional division of labour developed through cumulative social role negotiation. The question of the future of ASEAN's role depends on ASEAN being able to manage the competing pressures of great power rivalry and continue renegotiating role bargains with the great powers. This is made uncertain by: what the expectations of the great powers are with respect to their own roles and ASEAN's role particularly *vis-à-vis* the SCS conflict; and whether ASEAN can reach a consensus on the SCS issue and maintain some sort of unity in demonstrating

its continued competence to perform inclusive engagement and rule-making. It remains to be seen how ASEAN can manage these two related challenges.

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## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> This conception of ASEAN's role is based on a metaphor of the Asia-Pacific as an 'orchestra' where the great powers make up the different sections (brass, woodwind, percussion, strings). They possess the instruments (military hardware, economic and financial resources); it is they that essentially 'make the music'. The problem of great power rivalry means that the different sections want the orchestra to play their own 'score' (vision of regional order) and thus exist in a state of competition. Instead, the 'conductor', who does not possess any instrument (lacks material capabilities), steps up to provide a 'score' (framework of norms and rules) for the orchestra to play. It is able to do so because it is acknowledged as neutral and competent.
  - <sup>ii</sup> "Memorandum of conversation by the officer in charge of Thai and Malayan Affairs, 27th May 1954" Foreign Relations of the US 1952-1954 Vol XII Part 1 Doc 208 and "Telegram: The Secretary of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, Washington, 4th June 1954" *ibid* Doc 215.
  - <sup>iii</sup> "Action Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Bundy) to Secretary of State Rusk, Washington, 20th May /1968" FRUS 1964-1968 Vol XXVI Doc 367 and "Telegram From the Embassy in the Philippines to the Department of State, Manila, 25th July 1968" *ibid* Doc 369.



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